

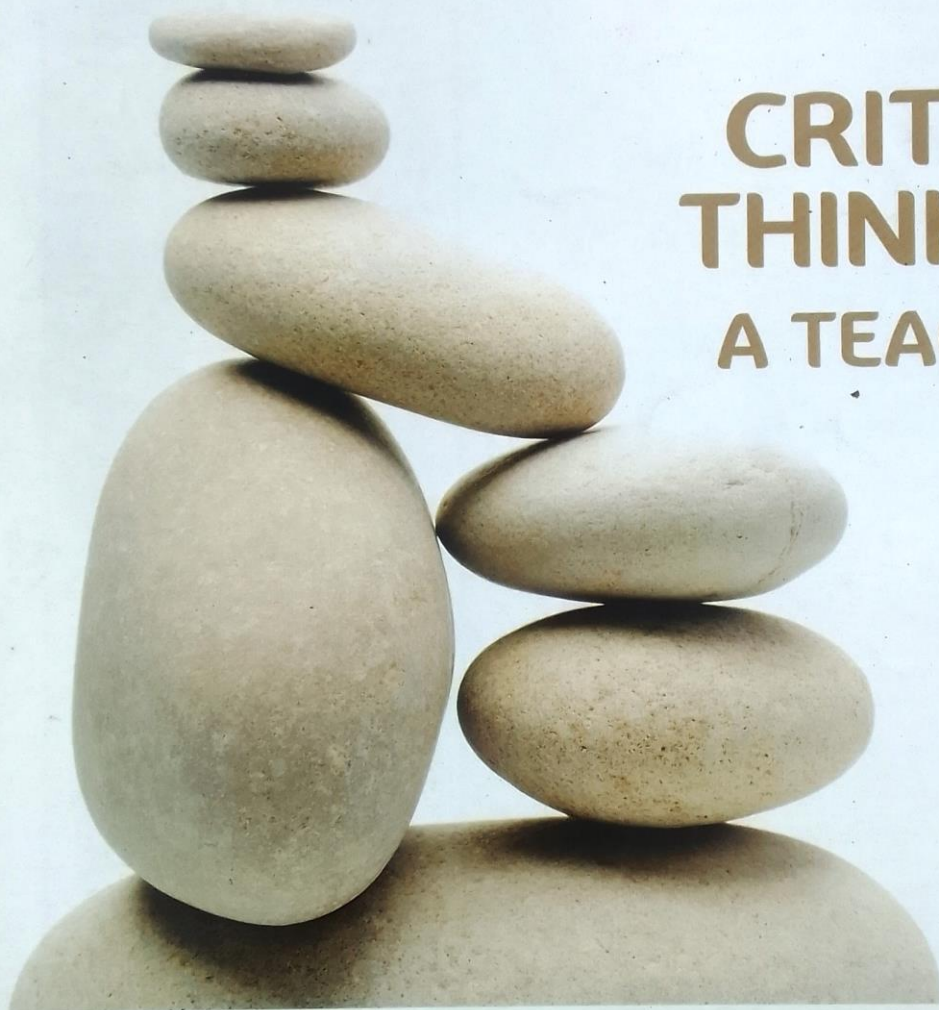
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A TEACHING
TOOL

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EP AND TEACHING
PRACTICE



CRITICAL THINKING AND
THE FOUR SKILLS



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BRAZ-TESOL Membership Committee
R. Coronel Oscar Porto, 800 - 2º andar
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São Paulo/SP - Brazil

Phone/Fax:

+55 11 3559-8782

E-mail:

braztesol@braztesol.org.br

Website:

www.braztesol.org.br

DEAR BRAZ-TESOLERS,

Recent trends in the teaching of English have emphasised the importance of promoting critical thinking as an integral part of English language pedagogy. But, after all, what is this "critical thinking" that EL educators want to bring into the English classroom? After all, does the concept of critical thinking really add value to the process of language learning?

With those queries in mind, we have challenged English teachers to write about ways in which critical thinking can be used in the classroom to enhance the process of teaching and to support the process of learning. As a result, we received a series of inspirational articles in which the writers discuss how critical thinking can be paired with not only the process of learning but also with teacher education.

Inés Kayon de Miller opens this edition with an article that discusses the use of Exploratory Practice (EP) in our professional context. She supports the view that EP will instil a crucial critical attitude in student teachers. In her opinion, a critical attitude and practice are crucial elements for future teachers to discuss the concept of 'universal' techniques for 'universal' classrooms in the average Brazilian context. If you want to learn more about Exploratory Practice and how it might influence critical thinking in teachers and learners, refer to the first article **WHY CRITICAL THINKING IN ELT TEACHER EDUCATION?**

In the second article, **CRITICAL THINKING AND TEACHER EDUCATION: A PERFECT MATCH**, Vinicius Nobre discusses the need to consider ways in which teacher education programmes can develop student teachers' critical ability. Vinicius argues that once teachers become more critical, their practice will gradually change, and they will be in a position to help learners incorporate critical thinking as part of the learning process. The author makes suggestions of critical thinking elements that can be incorporated as part of training courses.

In his article, **UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE ELT CLASSROOM**, Anderson Maia writes about the results of a survey he conducted to find out the extent to which EL teachers in Brazil understand what the use of critical thinking in the classroom entails. In this article, he discusses the results of the research and talks about some of the misconceptions that were detected through the survey. In **DEVELOPING CRITICAL WRITING SKILLS IN L2**, Doris de Almeida Soares discusses how the development of writing in second language learning goes beyond the mere jotting down of words on a piece of paper and having teachers correct mistakes. Doris suggests that learners should be "empowered" to consider critically the writing tasks they are given so that they become prepared to assess their own written production critically. She makes suggestions of complementary approaches to the development of the writing skill that can help teachers lay the foundations for such work.

In article five, **Feedback – Different Shades of Red, Yellow, Blue and Green**, Adriano Zanetti talks about error correction. He makes a distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors and goes on to tell the difference between different kinds of errors. Adriano makes practical suggestions on ways teachers can provide language learners with critical and useful feedback.

Is it fact or myth that in today's world of social networking, smart phones, e-boards and the likes, a learner who comes into an ELT classroom can learn English more effectively and faster? Leo Povoas in his article, **NEW ERA?**, discusses the benefits of technology and shares with us his views on the role of critical thinking and the way it can counterbalance the drawbacks technology might bring to the learning process.

In **SUPPLEMENTING TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING**, Maria Mizakami talks about how a teacher can relate critically to the course book taking into consideration positive points and drawbacks so that the course book works as a helper rather than a hindrance in class. The author recommends that from time to time, the teacher should supplement the course book with activities that promote collaborative work, higher-order thinking and even intercultural awareness so as to help develop learners' critical thinking skills.

Janaína Cardoso and Aniele Barboza start their article, **INCITING LANGUAGE LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING**, with an advice: "Teachers cannot just create and propose a kind of activity for their students, without carefully considering the students' profile: their needs, preferences and level". They go on to add a fifth skill to the process of learning, i.e., thinking. Janaína and Aniele build an argument around the premise that the enhancement of learners' critical thinking may be one of the main roles of teachers once critical thinking can be ultimately responsible for the success of language learning.

Walewska Gomes Braga, Ana Flora Alves de Oliveira and Thelma Christina Cortês, in their article, **WHY DON'T WE LIKE THE BOOKS WE NEED TO USE?**, discuss a process of Exploratory Practice (EP) they conducted with students at the Municipal School Santo Thomas de Aquino in Rio de Janeiro. They engaged in a process, they called "work for understanding" in an attempt to find out and identify the reasons why both students and teachers disliked the course book that had been developed for the school.

In her article, **CREATIVE CULTURE CRITICS IN THE ELT CLASSROOM. THE CULTURE KALEIDOSCOPE**, Andrea Gutierrez writes about her first language teaching experience. During a summer break in the US – Andrea's homeland –, she applied for an internship opportunity in La Plata, Argentina, and was selected to participate as a teacher and researcher at a Home Intercultural Learning programme. Andrea starts the article describe herself as "a foreigner to the country and to ELT [...]" . The author makes an interesting description of how the solidarity between teacher and learners made the process of language learning viable.

On behalf of all your students, thank you for being a teacher!



CARMEN LUCAS: IN MEMORIAM



Carmen Lucas became a professional role model for me from the first day I met her. Carmen can be easily described as a strong woman whose clear vision of the future influenced an entire generation of ELT professionals.

Through a well-structured strategic vision, and a readiness to face challenges, Carmen Lucas successfully transformed the ELT scenario in Brazil. She touched many lives with her irrefutable charisma and strong determination. Personally, I will always remember Carmen as the woman who taught me to "count my blessings".

Virginia Garcia
Second Vice-President BRAZ-TESOL

It was with great sadness that I heard of the passing away of Carmen Lucas (03/08/2014). She was a great example to us all within Brazil, having co-founded and supported a variety of initiatives and associations, which created the building blocks of the field of ELT which we have today. She was passionate about teaching, about education, about professional self-development and the need for qualification. She inspired me as a very young teacher, starting-off in my career here in Brazil in 1992. I remember talking to her just after my very first presentation at an IATEFL conference, in 1999, Edinburg. She was encouraging and attentive and that meant everything to me. I was moved and touched to have been able to say my last goodbye to her alongside her family and to see how deeply loved she was, not only as an ELT professional, but also as a mother, wife, grandmother and friend.

We invited fellow colleagues to send us a few words about Carmen Lucas and we hope that you all begin to get a good picture of the difference this very special lady made to the Brazilian ELT scenario.

Valéria França
BRAZ-TESOL First-Vice President

Carmen Lucas was a leading light in the making and development of BRAZ-TESOL. Following the establishment of the affiliate in 1986, and the First National Conference held in Curitiba in 1988, Carmen became President and oversaw the organisation of the Second National Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1990. She was then appointed as a member of the Advisory Council, and continued to offer her unstinting support to the affiliate in subsequent years.

Carmen's contribution to the cause of BRAZ-TESOL, and of the TEFL profession in Brazil generally, was of immense significance, and there is no doubt that she will be sorely missed by all her friends and colleagues.

Bob Carrington
BRAZ-TESOL Founder President

Carmem Lucas was one of the most important leaders in the ELT world. Here in Brazil, she was the founder, supporter and president of many teachers' associations, including BRAZ-TESOL and APLIERJ. Directly and indirectly, she contributed to the development of a large number of English teachers and she brilliantly represented Brazil in UK. However, I will keep in my memory not only this Carmem, but also the post-ELT Carmem, who would invite me to have lunch or a cup of tea at Colombo just to chat. It is a pity that we did not have many opportunities to repeat those casual meetings. APLIERJ is sad and we will all miss you, Carmem.

Janaina Cardoso,

Carmen Lucas was one of the great figures of ELT in Brazil. She was passionate about her profession and made a remarkable contribution to the history of the Cultura Inglesa Rio between 1967 and 1999, first as a teacher and ultimately as a Director. Carmen also left her mark on the ELT teaching community, leaving a legacy that remains to this day. She was an influential and popular presence during a time of major changes in the way English was taught in the classroom, was fundamental in the formation and development of ABCI, and was recognised internationally for her efforts to improve, enhance and promote not only the English language but also cultural ties with the UK. As a leader she was both admired and loved. Honoured by Queen Elizabeth in 1990 when she became an Honorary Member of the British Empire, she leaves us with very powerful and fond memories and a history that has rightly been recognized in an area that is essential to the development of this country.

Maria Lúcia Willemsens
Cultura Inglesa S.A., CEO

Carmen Lucas was the person who brought me to Brazil, to work at Cultura Rio; who helped me find my feet there; and who (as the president at the time) encouraged me to join BRAZ-TESOL. For all those things, I was and am in her debt. I was very sorry to hear of the passing of someone who did so much for ELT in Brazil, and for me personally.

Jeff Stranks

The passing away of Carmem Lucas has deeply touched me. The fortunate group of teachers who, just like me, have had the pleasure of interacting with her for so long are bound to feel equally distressed and truly saddened. However, at this moment of mourning, I'd rather remember the positive things she brought into my professional life as I believe this will make other people remember her as she has always been: a visionary leader, an educator ahead of her time, a professional ever in the pursue of state-of-the-art technology so as to cater for the interests of the Education industry.

With Carmem Lucas's encouragement and support my teaching career blossomed and I've been reaping the fruits of my professional development to these days. The death of Carmem Lucas is a great loss to all of us who have been lucky enough to enjoy the benefits of having her around and learning from her. Now, all that remains for us to do is to pay tribute to our beloved colleague so as to keep alive the memory of such an unforgettable professional and beautiful human being.

Mirian Cabral
Cultura Inglesa-Rio de Janeiro 1977/2000

Inés Kayon de Miller



Inés Kayon de Miller, PUC-Rio, is involved in (English) language teacher education at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. As mentor of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group, she is involved in developing and disseminating Exploratory Practice - a way of encouraging teachers and learners to engage in practitioner research. inesmiller@hotmail.com

WHY CRITICAL THINKING IN ELT TEACHER EDUCATION?

Introduction

This brief text is an abridged version of a paper that I am writing with a group of teacher-learners and another teacher educator to share with other teacher educators and teacher-learners our stories about the experience of developing Exploratory Practice (EP) in the Teaching Practice Courses, at PUC-Rio, Brazil. This idea is part of a dissemination initiative that emerged within the Rio Exploratory Practice Group¹.

Exploratory Practice is a way of working in classrooms, or in other contexts, by which teachers and learners, or other professionals, carry out their normal activities with a view to understanding 'what is going on' more deeply. Participants can focus on positive or negative issues that intrigue them about what is happening inside or outside their contexts. Such issues have become known as 'puzzles' to be better understood, rather than as 'problems' to be solved. On account of the integration between the pedagogical or professional tasks at hand and the investigative posture adopted by those involved, Exploratory

Practice has been considered a form of practitioner research inspired by inclusive and ethical principles².

We claim that EP work involves critical thinking as it focuses on developing participants' understandings and prioritizes the 'quality of life' that emerges in pedagogic or in other professional contexts.

Exploratory Practice as critical thinking in ELT Teacher education

As teacher-educators we face many paradoxes. We do understand that, due to the contextual demands on language teaching and learning in both public and private Brazilian educational contexts, our teacher-learners hope to obtain what we consider an excessively technical preparation. But, on the other hand, we need to resist to such pressures by offering a critical perspective. Working within the EP framework in initial teacher education, we are inspired to refocus teachers' work as 'work to understand what goes on in the classroom' and teacher education as a 'search for deeper understandings about learning to become teachers'.

Our main teacher educators' aim is to minimize the attraction that future teachers have for 'best'

¹ The Rio Exploratory Practice Group is integrated by teachers and learners interested in developing EP work.

The group meets monthly at PUC-Rio and organizes at least one event per year. For contacts, please write to epcentre@hotmail.com or inesmiller@hotmail.com. It is part of the international Exploratory Practice Network, organized by Prof. Dick Allwright (r.allwright@lancaster.ac.uk).

² For more on Exploratory Practice, see Allwright and Hanks (2009), Gieve and Miller (2006) and <http://www.lettras.puc-rio.br/unidades&nucleos/epcentre/index.htm>.

methods and 'ready-made' techniques. We wish to demystify the commonly held view of teachers as trouble-shooters (Wright, 2005) because we believe that trouble-shooting or pre-packaged techniques tend not to work in the everydayness of post-method classrooms (Kumaravivelu, 2003).

Such a critical attitude is crucial for our future teachers since we find that, in our professional context, the illusory concept of 'universal' techniques for 'universal' classrooms clashes strongly with what the average Brazilian teacher faces. In fact, it is quite common for these professionals to teach several classes, often at various levels, in different schools and, sometimes, on the same day. In order to cope with such social and interactional diversity, teachers need to have an extremely high degree of flexibility, not sets of pre-planned tool-kits. In Allwright and Miller (2012), we explain that the 'desire' to find the 'best' educational practice establishes a state of physical and mental stress that contributes to 'burn-out' and trust EP as a potential 'antidote' to the widespread syndrome.

This is why, within the Teaching Practice courses, we consider every occasion to be a significant opportunity to formulate puzzles – usually in the form of 'why'

questions – about our language classroom lives, about the experience of observing school life, about participating in various ways as teacher-learners or teacher educators in another teacher's class, and, last but not least, about planning, preparing and teaching micro-lessons at the university, as well as 'real' lessons in the laboratory schools.

Although the way in which we interweave our 'puzzlement' (Hanks, 1999) within the Teaching Practice courses has been presented and discussed elsewhere (Allwright and Miller, 2012), we wish to include here a brief illustrative description of the specific moments when this happens:

- **Teaching Practice courses as opportunities to formulate our teacher-learner and our teacher-educator puzzles** The weekly meetings at the university are co-constructed as opportunities that we have, as learners, as teachers, as future teachers, as teacher-learners, as teacher educators, as colleagues, as friends, etc., to raise our puzzles about life inside (or outside) the classroom.
- **Time and presence at schools as 'observing for understanding'** During the observation time and presence at the selected schools, teacher-learners are advised to 'observe for understandings'. Classes at the university are considered as unique opportunities to reflect and discuss this re-signified observation experience. Many 'whys' usually arise from what teacher-learners observe about the school routine, teachers' practices and students' attitudes.
- **Micro-teaching at the university as 'working for understanding'** Apart from the period spent in schools, teacher-learners are involved in micro-teaching activities, which consist of short lessons that are planned and presented to colleagues and teacher educators, as part of the sessions at the university. The idea of presenting micro-lessons is to give beginning teachers the opportunity to select some content to work on, prepare a micro-lesson plan and manage time with an albeit artificial class, as a way of gradually preparing themselves for guiding classroom work with 'real' language learners. The important point is that the preparation and presentation of micro-lessons by each teacher-learner, as well as the comments made by classmates, are re-signified as learning opportunities rather than as opportunities to display technical knowledge. Questioning what was learnt by planning, teaching, participating and/or observing the micro-lessons helps emerge

Exploratory Practice has been considered a form of practitioner research inspired by inclusive and ethical principles





innumerable issues about language (L1 and/or L2), discourse, genre, materials, pedagogic activities, group participation, etc. Also, within the reflective stance adopted, we discuss the way in which each one understands his/her own process as well as the reaction of fellow-students and teacher educators.

- **Lessons taught at schools as potentially exploitable pedagogic activities** The notion of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) is central to Exploratory Practice because it integrates everyday teaching practices with an investigative and critical attitude. The underlying rationale is that a pedagogic activity proposed by a teacher or a learner may become an opportunity for classroom participants to understand issues not only related to the pedagogical content being worked on but also to what is going on inside as well as outside the classroom (for more on PEPAs, or APPE in Portuguese, see Miller et al, 2008). As future teachers begin to plan PEPAs in this pre-professional context, they also become familiarized with the promising notion of 'planning to understand' (Allwright, 2003).
- **Reflective paper as an opportunity to integrate pre-professional learning and understandings** In order to enable future teachers to become more aware of the complexities of their future professional life, our Teaching Practice courses promote opportunities to integrate teacher-learning and understanding practices. We encourage spoken and written critical meta-reflection about the experience itself as well as a final reflective paper at the end of

each term. These final term papers have come to replace the formerly required reports, which used to focus on descriptive and informative issues about the school experience. During course sessions and when they write the paper at the end of each course, most prospective teachers tend to discover the value of critical reflective discourse as a locus for pre-professional learning. Based on our experience, we believe by engaging teacher-learners in reflective discursive practices in the early years of their careers, we are investing in opportunities for long-term personal professional growth. We claim that critical thinking will engage them in classroom and social transformations.

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Vinicius Nobre

Vinicius Nobre is the Academic Manager at Cultura Inglesa São Paulo. He is also a CELTA and DELTA tutor, a Pearson Longman author and former president of BRAZ-TESOL. www.vnobre.terra.com.br



CRITICAL THINKING AND TEACHER EDUCATION: A PERFECT MATCH

Even though there seems to be a lot of debate over a unified definition for critical thinking, most researchers and teachers agree with its importance in any learning process. Brown (2004), for instance, states that in an ideal academic English programme, "the objectives of a curriculum are not limited to linguistic factors alone, but also include developing the art of critical thinking." Many books and articles offer practical ideas to English teachers and encourage us to consider techniques and approaches that will help learners develop problem-solving and decision-making skills, for example. However, do language teachers feel prepared to effectively instill critical thinking and adapt their practice so as to add a new focus on skills that go beyond the language itself? And can teacher trainers take advantage of what we already know about critical thinking in order to revisit initiatives that aim at professional development and better equip trainees?

In order to reflect upon the connection between critical thinking and teacher education, I would like to refer to Brookfield's (1987) definition. Brookfield states that when we think critically about a given topic, we are forced to consider our own relationship to it and how we personally fit into the context of the issue. In that sense, teacher trainers need to think of how they can

help novice - and more experienced teachers - reflect upon their relationship to the acquisition and learning of a foreign language, and upon the role they play in the entire process. We need to provoke teachers into considering knowledge, awareness and attitudes that go beyond the concrete classroom practice. It is very important that trainers get practitioners to look into their stance towards the students and the institution, for example, and engage in discussions that cover beliefs regarding learning, teaching and professionalism.

The objectives of a curriculum are not limited to linguistic factors alone, but also include developing the art of critical thinking

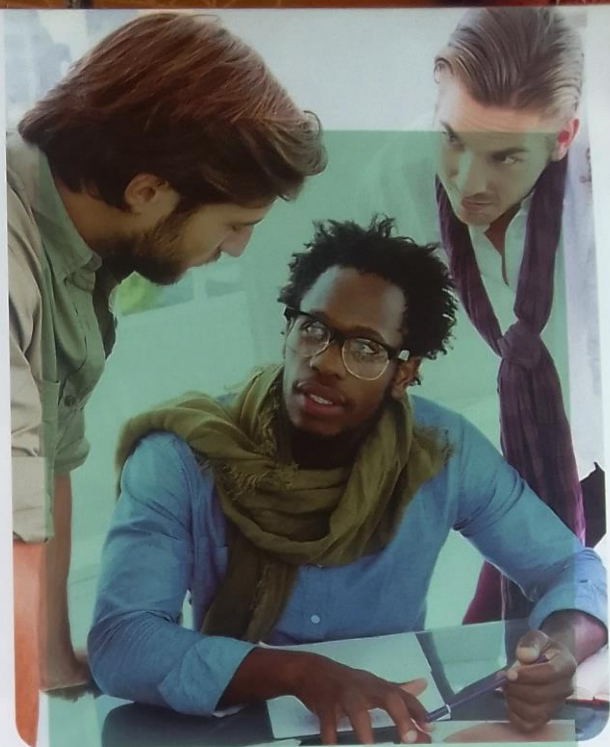
In order to specify the characteristics that trainers might want to aim at developing in student teachers, I would like to resort to Ennis (1987). He identified a number of characteristics that are common to critical thinkers. The characteristics include: being open minded and mindful of alternatives; attempting to be well-informed; able to judge well the credibility of sources; able to identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions; and able to judge well the quality of an argument, including its reasons, assumptions and evidence. He also suggested that critical thinkers would be likely to be able to develop and defend a reasonable position; ask clarifying questions; formulate plausible hypotheses; plan experiments well; define terms in a way appropriate for the context and draw conclusions when warranted. If we look at the competencies that a critical thinker has, we can easily identify a number of characteristics that are also expected to be found in effective teachers. Nevertheless, a lot of training initiatives tend to focus on a very pragmatic aspect of teaching, revolving around the implementation of mechanical techniques and the reproduction of procedures for determined tasks. Therefore, I would like to reinforce the importance of a broader scope for teacher educators that should comprise more than prescriptive tips for classroom management or automatized recipes for drilling.

In my opinion, training programmes need to carefully consider ways to make teachers more critical thinkers. Only after teachers have become more critical themselves, will they be able to change their own practice and move on to help learners develop these skills too. Going back to the characteristics highlighted by Ennis, these are some ideas of what trainers can do in order to incorporate elements of critical thinking into training courses:

Assess whether teachers are really considering alternatives that go beyond their well-known repertoire of teaching and encourage conscious experimentation with varied methods, approaches and techniques.

Ask trainees to seek further formal knowledge, setting goals for research and reading - always asking for theoretical justifications for the decisions made.

Only accept justifications that have sound theoretical background and reject sources whose credibility can



Trainers need to provoke teachers into considering skills, knowledge, awareness and attitudes that go beyond the concrete classroom practice

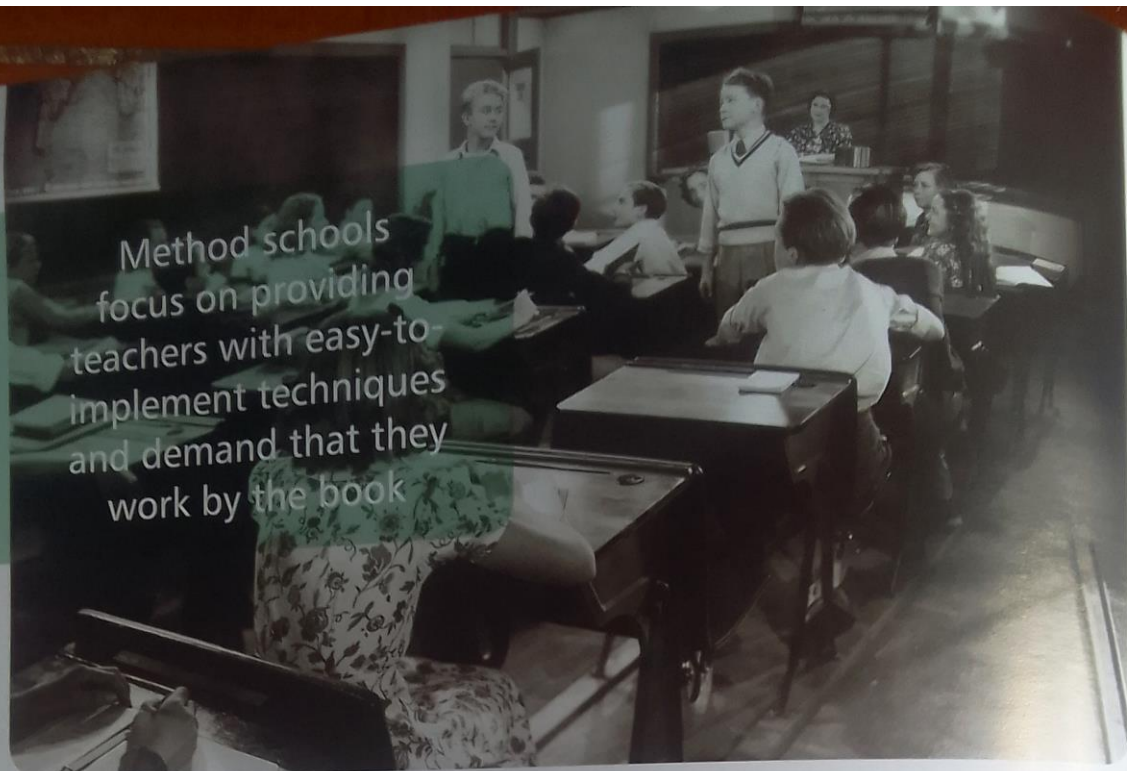
be challenged, demanding reference to serious and reliable academic literature.

Ask for the rationale behind decisions and assumptions about students, their needs and the selected tasks – always challenging trainees to resort to their own knowledge and experience.

Allow trainees to maintain well-informed discussions about the reasons behind their plans and the on-line decisions made during their teaching.

Raise awareness of the role that teachers play inside and outside the classroom, considering their interactions with students, fellow teachers, supervisors and the community.

Instill the need for continuous development and more formal studies.



Both King (1995) and Taba (1966) argue that the level of students' thinking is strongly influenced by the level of questions which are asked in class. If we take this data into the realms of teacher training, we can therefore say that trainers' thoughtful questions might play a crucial role in enhancing teachers' higher level cognitive processes. Teachers who experience this kind of cognitive exercise will then be better prepared to pose the same type of questions to their language learners. In other words, trainers should ask the difficult questions, resort to scaffolding techniques on a regular basis and expect deeper conclusions from trainees in order to get teachers to become more critical, but also to provide trainees with a model of how to trigger critical thinking.

When joining training courses or professional development initiatives of any kind, teachers need to be made aware of the importance of seeking evidence, closely examining reasoning and assumptions, analyzing basic concepts, and tracing out implications. Unfortunately, many training courses are gradually becoming shorter and more prescriptive. Method schools often focus on providing teachers with easy-to-implement techniques and demand that they work by the book – following steps without necessarily understanding the underlying principles of what they are doing. If we want critical thinkers to blossom in our language classrooms, we first need to revisit training

frameworks and processes. Critical thinking needs to be an integral part of professional development and trainers have to constantly reflect upon their role in turning teachers into more critical professionals, who are then able to make well-informed decisions, explain why these decisions were made and develop this very same knowledge in their own language learners.

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Anderson Maia

Anderson Maia, Academic Manager, has taught EFL in Brazil and ESL in North Carolina Public Schools for several years. He holds a Degree in English (UFPA) and a Master's in TESOL (USA). Anderson is currently working on his PhD in TESOL at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. maia.afg@gmail.com <http://talkingtesol.blogspot.com.br/>



UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

Introduction

What happens to thinking when you attach the word critical to it? Is this another newfangled label that promotes a novel pedagogy or method for purely commercial reasons or other ulterior motivations without substantially affecting learning? Is this label bringing into ELT something extraneous to communication skills, such as political causes and social concerns? We in the language teaching profession are rightly suspicious of anything that claims to be new, fashionable, or revolutionary nowadays. For example, "Critical thinking" is definitely one of the watchwords in today's EFL classroom; however, what do teachers really think about the issue?

Language learning
programs can promote
critical thinking in
various ways

In order to investigate what EFL teachers in Brazil think about "critical thinking", I recently conducted a survey with statements about the topic to which teachers were asked to agree or disagree using a 5-point scale. As a result, three major myths about critical thinking were found to be most common among Brazilian EFL teachers. This article attempts to describe these three found misconceptions and discuss related research on critical thinking in foreign language teaching. It is imperative that language educators understand what critical thinking is before they can make best use of it in their classrooms.

MYTH 1:

Critical thinking should take place at the end of a lesson after language has been taught

More than 70% of Brazilian EFL teachers declared to strongly agree that critical thinking takes place during language practice only. A strong belief among these teachers is that critical thinking is a result of using the language in speaking, listening, reading, or writing and not embedded in the language learning process. In order to better understand how critical thinking places itself in the EFL classroom, let us review what this term entails and then relate it to a sample language lesson.

Critical thinking or higher order thinking is a concept based on learning taxonomies such as Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al, 2001). The idea is that some types of learning require more cognitive processes than others. In Bloom's taxonomy, for example, skills involving analysis, evaluation, and synthesis are thought to be of a higher order, requiring different learning and teaching methods than the learning of facts and concepts. As a consequence, it is possible for teachers to incorporate higher order thinking throughout language learning.

Let us take a typical grammar lesson within the communicative approach as an example. First, the teacher sets a communicative context in order to activate learners' prior experiences and background knowledge. Next, the teacher introduces a conversation model to be further used in a role-play activity. After sufficient practice and modeling (focus on meaning), the teacher guides learners into inferring a grammar rule (focus on form, inductive method; see Widodo, 2006). Then, the teacher provides students with controlled practice of the new item by having them order words to create a sentence or revise a new dialogue. Finally, learners are evaluated by generating a new conversation using the target language.

Although this is a very simple communicative grammar lesson, learners are challenged with higher order thinking throughout. The table below breaks down each part of this example lesson and demonstrates its relation to critical thinking by using Bloom's taxonomy.

Activity	Bloom's taxonomy	Definition
Setting of communicative context to activate prior experiences and background knowledge	Knowledge	Remember previously learned information
Introduction of conversation model and role-play activity.	Comprehension	Demonstrate an understanding of the facts.
Inference of grammar rule.	Analysis	Break down objects or ideas into simpler parts and find evidence to support generalizations
Controlled practice (sentence ordering, revision of new dialogue).	Application	Apply knowledge to actual situations.
	Evaluation	Make and defend judgments based on internal evidence or external criteria.
Generation of new dialogue	Synthesis	Compile component ideas into a new whole or propose alternative solutions.

This brief analysis demonstrates how critical thinking can be incorporated throughout a language lesson as higher order thinking skills are demanded at each step.

MYTH 2:

Critical thinking is a consequence of students' mainstream education in Portuguese. There is not enough time to work it in Language Institutes

The survey conducted also pointed out that 56% of Brazilian EFL teachers either mostly or totally agree that critical thinking is a result of schooling in students' native language. Unlike the first myth presented, this second misbelieve goes beyond the classroom walls. It claims that critical thinking is the sheer result of learners' mainstream education and that language institute programs are too busy to support higher order thinking skills. In fact, language-learning programs can promote critical thinking in various ways.

Critical thinking and learning strategies are joint efforts to support and contribute to foreign language learning

One way is through well-designed communicative language classes, as explained previously in the sample grammar lesson described above. Another way is by offering alternative programs related to English learning outside the classroom. For example, reading clubs, chat cafés, karaoke sessions, movie exhibits, and drama clubs to name a few. In programs like these, learners may have the opportunity to use higher order thinking by comparing and contrasting cultures, by discussing cause and effect of social events in the world, by identifying whole and parts in famous landmarks, or just by summarizing the ideas from a movie.

In essence, critical thinking needs to be continuously redefined in practice (Berhman, 2006). This is because higher order thinking is a theory with implications for education rather than a distinctive instructional methodology or a time-consuming activity. Hence, EFL institutes can embody this educational perspective in and outside their classrooms through diverse academic and cultural programs.

MYTH 3:

To teach critical thinking means to teach learning strategies

According to the survey conducted, 63% of EFL teachers in Brazil mostly or totally agree that teaching critical thinking is the same as teaching learning strategies. In this regard, it has been previously noted that critical thinking is the explicit and monitored use of higher order thinking skills such as understanding, synthesizing, and analyzing. Teaching learning strategies, on the other hand, entails explicit and monitored use of mechanisms used to foster learning.

To explain better, while critical thinking gathers a variety of cognitive processes, learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990a). Consequently, within the EFL classroom, teachers can explicitly demonstrate the use of cognitive, meta-cognitive and social-affective strategies to enhance language learning (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). These learning strategies include memorization, finding social-cultural meaning, testing inferences, managing resources (e.g. time, dictionaries) and creating opportunities for practice among so many other things. Such actions enable students to advance



in developing skills in a foreign language whereas critical thinking enables students to develop the cognition involved in learning that language.

Yi-an (2011) conducted a research to investigate the relationship between critical thinking and learning strategies in Taiwanese EFL students' reading performance. Findings of the study suggested that both critical thinking and learning strategies are trainable and teachable in foreign language education. Results also pointed out that as learners become aware of higher order thinking and learning strategies, they progressively become more independent in developing their own communicative competencies. To sum up, critical thinking and learning strategies are joint efforts to support and contribute to foreign language learning.

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Doris de Almeida Soares

Doris de Almeida Soares is a teacher, trainer, researcher, writer and co-author of textbooks. She holds an MA in Applied Linguistics (UFRJ) and a PhD in Languages (PUC-Rio). She teaches English at the Brazilian Naval Academy (RJ), where she also works as a coordinator and as an online tutor. dorisoares@terra.com.br



DEVELOPING CRITICAL WRITING SKILLS IN L2

Shaping thought, feelings and ideas into coherent and cohesive formal written communication is always a challenge; it requires creativity, reflection, organization and evaluation as "good substance poorly arranged loses most of its value" (Paul et al., 2010:107). Writing also demands an understanding of both the textual genres one can choose from to communicate their ideas and the relationship between themselves and their intended audience(s). From a foreign language perspective, text production is even more complex when learners struggle with a language system over which they do not have full command.

Upon giving these issues some thought, we come to realize that the development of L2 writing entails much more than simply providing our students with the opportunity to write texts and have them checked so that learners know which mistakes they have made. Instead, we should empower them to critically consider the writing tasks they are faced with and to critically assess their own productions. One possibility to lay the foundations for such work is to blend two complementary approaches to writing: the *process* approach and the *genre* approach.

The *process* approach understands composition as a

form of problem solving. Typical classroom activities encourage learners to use a repertoire of strategies to engage in cognitive processes such as generating ideas, planning, goal-setting, monitoring and evaluating what is going to be written (White and Arndt, 1999, p.3). The *genre* approach highlights the fact that we write to achieve some purpose. To do so, we resort to fairly fixed and recurrent patterns of discourse (genres). Typical teaching activities encourage learners to analyse textual organization and to reflect upon discourse and contextual aspects of language use *vis-à-vis* an intended communicative purpose (Hyland, 2003).

Common to both approaches, we find activities that foster the use of critical thinking skills to promote better understanding of what it takes to write for communication. These are especially useful at intermediate and higher levels, when learners are asked to write more complex texts. In this article, I suggest a teaching sequence that critically involves the students in the writing of a book review, but which can be adapted to any writing task.

Teaching suggestions

In a critical writing lesson, we may start, for example,

proposing that students work collaboratively to assess their knowledge about the target audience and the

contents they wish to explore in their writing. The following sample task analysis may guide such discussion.

ACTIVITY 1: Reflecting about the writing task (Adapted from Soares, 2009)

Read the instructions to this CAE writing task:

"An International business magazine has asked readers to name a book which has helped them in their job. Write a review for the magazine including the name of the book, a brief summary of the contents, what you personally learned from the book and how it may help other people in their work."

Think about the following questions. Share your thoughts with your partner.

1. What do I know about my target readers? Are they laymen or specialists in the field? How different are our contexts? Which tone should I use with them?
2. What do I want to communicate? What is my intention (to inform, to persuade, to compare, to discuss)?
3. What do my readers probably know about the topic I am writing about?
4. What do they not know? What types of new information should I put forward?
5. What questions would my readers have about this topic?
6. Are there any central concepts I need to clarify and exemplify? Which ones? How can I do that?
7. Where can I get the information I need to produce my text?
8. What genre am I supposed to write? What are its essential characteristics?

A sample task analysis

As a follow-up activity, we may invite students to share the content of their discussions with the whole class to assess similarities and differences in terms of task understanding and to produce a list of points to bear in mind when producing their texts.

Once the purpose of the text, its readership and its tone is established, learners can engage in the generation of ideas for their texts. Popular activities in L2 writing classes are *brainstorming* (jotting down words, phrases and ideas that come to our minds without concern for relevance or organization) and *free writing* (topic exploration through writing continuously for a set period of time, usually 5-10 minutes, without worrying about linguistic accuracy). After that, students may work in small groups to compare notes or read their texts to one another.

The classmates assess which items should be kept, expanded, reshaped or not used at all. This activity should result in the selection of potential ideas and their organization into outlines to guide their writing. The outlines should be seen just as a starting point once they will probably be modified as new ideas come up during the writing phase.

It is also important to remind students that generally, in real life, what we put down on paper is just a first draft that will go under a lot of revision and rewriting, and that it is beneficial to invite others to comment on, especially on the clarity, relevance, coherence and sequencing of ideas in the texts.

Notwithstanding, not many students know how to go about giving useful feedback. We may help by providing a checklist (a yes/no set of questions) that explicitly tells them what to focus on. This sample could be used with the task in Activity 1:

BOOK REVIEW CHECKLIST	Yes	No	Comments
Does the review state these elements: book title, author's name, date of publication and publishing company?			
Does it provide a clear summary of the book content and purpose?			
Does it provide a clear and positive evaluation of the book reviewed?			
Are the reasons why the book may help the target readers explained and justified?			
Does it mention what the writer has learned from the book?			
Does it contain the essential elements of a review? Are those well-organized?			

A sample book review checklist

Students should read each other's papers and use the checklist to guide their feedback session, which can be oral or written. We may also elicit students' opinion about the activity, how relevant it was for them and if they intend to use their partners' comments in their revision.

Once students are familiar with the concept of checklists, they can also collaboratively produce their own to fit each writing assignment. In so doing, we are not only stimulating critical thinking on the part of our students, but also making them more responsible for their own learning process as well as integrating language skills.

After the students have improved their first drafts, we may collect them to read as "interested readers". At this stage, providing feedback on content and structure through genuine questions such as "Can you make the connection between x and y clear, please?" or "Good point! Why not exploit it a bit further?" is more productive than scrutinizing the text for errors. The reason is simple: there is no use in dealing with grammar, spelling and punctuation in sentences whose ideas still need to be developed. Ideally, we should encourage students to revise their texts based on our comments and submit them again

for marking, when local language work can be carried out more effectively.

Final words

Writing has a particular logic that does not occur in a social void. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to help learners develop the necessary strategies to productively engage in text production. These include the ability to analyse, logically process, apply, and evaluate information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection and reasoning, as well as to solve specific problems, hence to effectively communicate (Scriven and Paul, 2003).

Having tried similar activities with my own groups (Soares, 2006), I can confidently say that learners find them useful. They tend to incorporate their partners' comments both directly, making the suggested changes, and indirectly, by adapting the suggestions received. Above all, learners perceive the outcomes of critical writing practice as positive for the process of learning.

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Adriano Zanett

Adriano Zanetti holds a BA in Letras, a Post-graduate degree in Language Teaching Methodologies, and an RSA Diploma. Teacher, trainer, Cambridge ESOL Examiner for 25 years. A Pronunciation SIG member at CIESOL, responsible for activating pronunciation exposure for teachers and students. dricozane@gmail.com



FEEDBACK – DIFFERENT SHADES OF RED, YELLOW, BLUE AND GREEN

Error correction may be extremely strenuous for both learners and teachers if it is not dealt with caution. Some people tend to downgrade it whilst others find it a necessary condition for language acquisition on the grounds that grammatical and lexical competences can increase the rate at which learners develop.

The significance of learners' errors

According to Corder (1967), language learners produce errors that may be both systematic and creative in nature. He mentions *systematic errors* (more evident in ESL/EFL learning) and *non-systematic errors* (more evident in one's native language).

Corder makes a distinction between different terms that refer to error:

- Mistakes are inaccuracies caused by the learners' not activating what they have been exposed to. Correction may happen yet via some sort of guidance.
- Errors are repetitive imperfections, which refuse to go away even though attention has been drawn to them and correction has taken place oftentimes. To that matter, they seem more significant as they occur on the grammatical, lexical and phonological fronts and should be a target of analysis and improvement.
- Slips will occur in either process, in native or non-native learning, and most flaws stem from distraction, physical and emotional distress. These ones are entitled to self-correction.
- Attempts are caused by a genuine lack of knowledge. Learners try to communicate through the language they either lack in or that is new to them.
- Variations are not treated as errors by some linguistics as they may vary in terms of structures, spelling, lexis and pronunciation and still get the intended meaning. For instance, British English will differ from American when it comes to spelling. American English will differ from Australian when one considers pronunciation. It is fair to say, then, it is not wrong to use one particular American lexical item putting on an Australian accent.

That said, it is my belief that errors are significant in a number of ways, but fundamentally to: a) *the teacher*, as they show a student's progress as well as the strategies used to that end; b) *to the learner*, as they can be more

... in a perfect world,
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scour the correction

analytical and judgmental of their competence and, eventually, learn from their own imperfections.

Reflecting on error correction

My experience has shown that the response to errors will fundamentally depend on what level of communication breakdown they constitute. A new feature acquired by a learner will require new adjustments and treatments. And when providing feedback, one should bear in mind the aim of the activity. Being it either *accuracy* or *fluency oriented* the corrective feedback may take place *on the spot* or *delayed*. Evidently, under no circumstances must overcorrection interfere in the learning process.

Oral activities might be more demanding on the teacher since they require constant monitoring and, above all, listening to learners. In my view, pronunciation should technically be corrected on the spot to avoid dragging communication down. There are instances, though, when it is wise to wait and later draw attention to whatever has cropped up in the task.

As for *Writing*, in a perfect world, we would like our students to take their marked compositions home and carefully scour the correction. Unfortunately, most students only check to see how much "red" is on the paper and then file it away. As a solution, a colour-correction code the teachers use at Cultura Inglesa São João del Rei has proven to be an aid to learning. When marking our learners' written work, we have standardised the following colour scheme:

- *Red* means communication breakdown.
- *Yellow* indicates that attention is needed.
- *Blue* means item provided
- *Green* says good to go.

Not only does the colour code focuses on what needs attention, but it also indicates what is working fine.

The sentence "*I live in SJDR since 2010*" will require different treatments according to the level: *an attempt* (at A2¹), *a mistake* (at B1), *a slip* (occasionally produced at B2) and *an error* (systematically produced at C1). Hence, language imperfections need to be *flagged*, *provided* and *penalized*, e.g.: *an attempt* by A2-student (*provided*) will be *yellow* to a B1-student (*flagged*) but *red* to a C2-student (*penalised*).

I have been marking papers online for some time now and this game-like *toing and froing* has proven to be a lot more effective than the paper versions for a

¹ Refer to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Levels

... most students check
to see how much "red"
is on the paper and
then file it away

number of reasons:

- It provides technical training – tools for self-correction
- Correction is faster, generating fast response
- It is thought-provoking – critical thinking is bound to be developed
- It allows room for proof-reading/editing
- Learners capitalize on peer analysis, criticism, modelling and learning
- It reduces the amount of paper teachers carry around
- Writing tasks can be stored and revisited
- Our careful written' corrections do not get wasted

Conclusion

As I see it, error correction can be a powerful tool for bringing up the best in language analysis. However, motivation can be at risk if feedback rules are too stringent. Feedback should be sensitive, efficient and effective to help learners get past inter-language or the plateau level. It is vitally important to define the communicative dimensions (fluency and accuracy) that are involved in the teaching-learning process. Identifying such dimensions will generate a clear-cut idea to correct the imperfections without curbing learners' motivation.

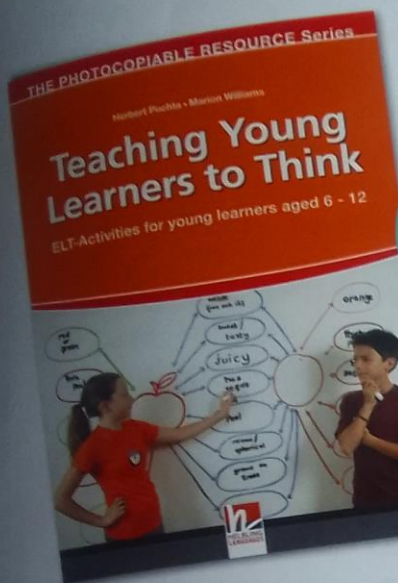
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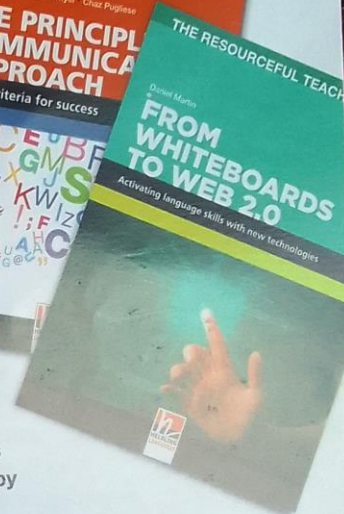
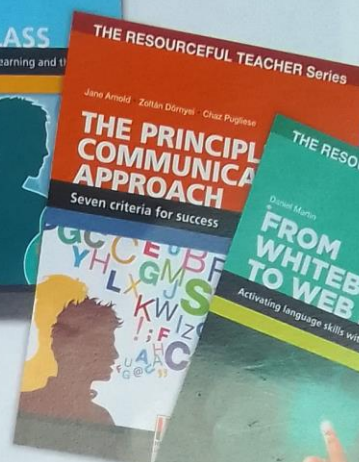
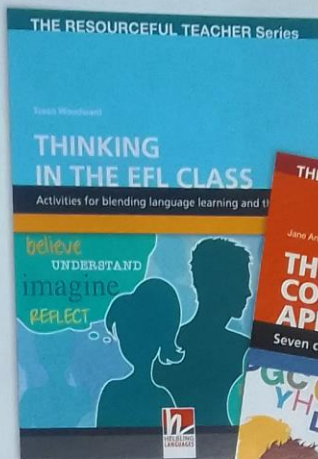
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Leo Povoas

Leo Povoas has been an EFL teacher for over 20 years having worked for different language schools in Cabo Frio, Brasília, São Paulo and Zurich, Switzerland. Currently he is working for The Scole – Special English Studies in Rio de Janeiro. lppteacher@gmail.com



A NEW ERA?

In today's world of social networking, smart phones, e-boards, educational websites, and all manner of hyper connectivity, it seems as though a learner who comes into an ELT classroom can learn English more effectively and faster. We all know that this assumption is rather misleading and in most cases does not apply to everyone. However, we should not deny the benefits of technology and how priceless its advance has helped our learning and teaching. Learners have become more independent and somewhat audacious. The classroom environment has become livelier and visually more attractive. Teachers have now a vast variety of different tools in their hands, many more resources and sources of information to rely on. Yet one thing remains the same: we work with people's mind. So, have you ever heard or read about Critical Thinking? What is it? Does it have a role to play? If so, what is the role of this crucial 'tool' in an ELT classroom? How can teachers provide learners with the best way to foster Critical Thinking? These are the questions that I will try and answer as precisely and concisely as I possibly can, as well as share some of my experience with you.

Firstly, I would like to quote the definition used by the Foundation for Critical Thinking website (Paul and Elder, 2008). It says: "Critical Thinking is that mode

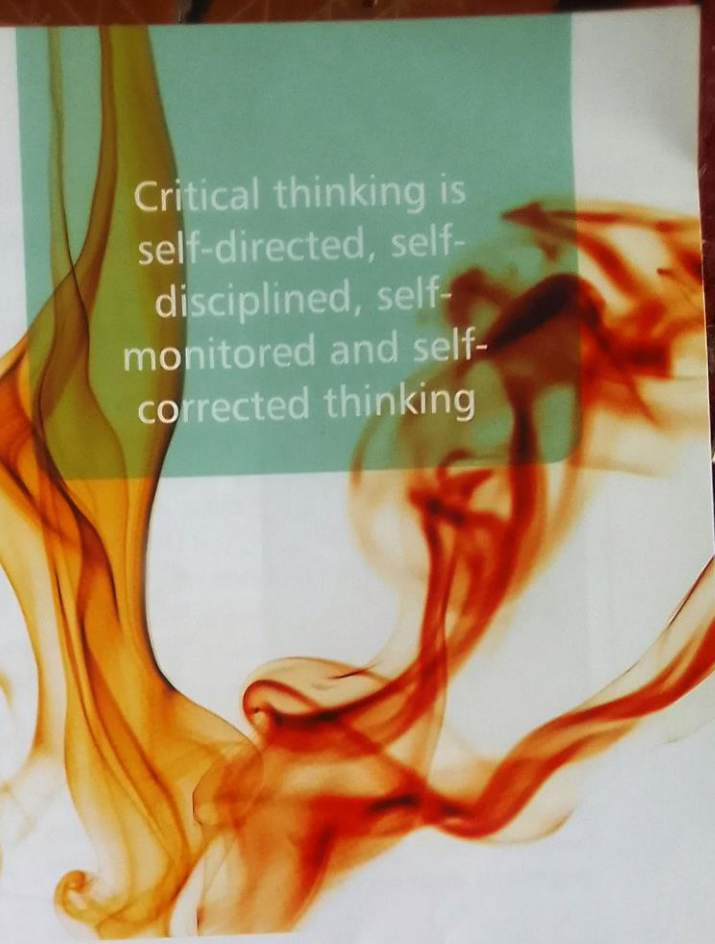
of thinking – about any subject, content, or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrected thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem-solving ideas, as well as a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism." At first glance it seems a bit too theoretical, ambitious and you might be wondering what on earth this has to do with our reality. In fact, this has everything to do with our routine since our main aim is to teach and eventually hope our students can speak, write, read and understand English well, and use it successfully in their life regardless of their purpose, whether academic, work or even fun.

No doubt Brazil is a country which places great emphasis on speaking and that Brazilians are more willing to engage themselves in a conversation in English than, say Swiss German learners, for instance. Nevertheless, Swiss Germans may be able to sustain a conversation more easily than our Brazilian learners since the Critical Thinking process is practised in regular schools at a very early age. This process is

divided into four different stages which are not linear and may overlap. They are: 1. Identifying assumptions, 2. Checking accuracy and validity, 3. Taking alternative perspectives and 4. Taking informed actions. If teachers are to take their students through this ongoing process, providing students with Critical Thinking skills (analyzing, reasoning, evaluating, problem solving and decision making) is essential. So, how can we help our learners to develop these skills?

Personally speaking, we should take every opportunity we have to speak English to our students no matter where we are, inside or outside the classroom. Establishing a good rapport with our students is a vital tool to do so. Simple questions such as: "How are you today?", "What did you do last weekend?", "What did you do at school this morning?", "Why?", "Why not?" and so on, sure is a good start. Showing interest in our students' world, perceiving what their needs are usually makes them more comfortable and confident to speak English. Is this practice feasible to the younger learner as well? I would say: definitely! The earlier we train our students to use English to communicate, the better results we will achieve. Classroom language and the use of formulaic language should also be part of our routine so that our learners will acquire language and at the same time slowly and gradually start following the stages of the Critical Thinking process.

In a reading skills lesson for a group of teens who have reached intermediate level, for example, how do you go about presenting the topic? Do you usually go straight to the textbook, ask your students to open it to page such and such, read through the text, do tasks, give them the correct answers and afterwards move on to a different activity? Or, do you first provide students with a pre-reading task, perhaps showing them a video snippet and then asking questions related to the topic? From my experience, students become a lot more engaged and therefore, perform better once they have previously been given the opportunity to think and talk about it. Then, after checking answers individually, or in pairs or groups or as a whole class, students should be ready to do the post-reading activity. At this stage, as learners have already had a great deal of input they should be ready to answer follow-up questions. By doing so, we are providing learners with the opportunity to listen to their peers, share their views, ideas and experiences, and give



Critical thinking is
self-directed, self-
disciplined, self-
monitored and self-
corrected thinking

their personal opinion. In other words, students will be given the opportunity to exercise Critical Thinking. You might be surprised to realise that sometimes learners come up with unique experiences and ideas regardless of their age or cultural background. Last but not least, teachers could assign a writing activity for homework asking learners to summarize what they have discussed in class using their own words.

The same procedure could also be applied to a listening, speaking, and writing skills' lesson. Engaging our learners, establishing a good rapport, using a variety of patterns of interaction, giving them time to contemplate, bringing to our learners a wide diversity of opinions and experience in an ELT classroom can only foster a Critical Thinking mind. In fact, I firmly believe that if we pursue this plan, not only are we sure to contribute tremendously to the development of our learners to use English more effectively, but perhaps, just perhaps, also to the development of critical thinking individuals.

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Maria Mizakami

Maria Mizakami has been an EFL teacher for 14 years, 10 of them at Cultura Inglesa Londrina. She holds a BA in Modern Foreign Languages (UEL) and a CPE (Cambridge ESOL Certificate). Currently, Mizakami has been doing her Master's degree in Language and Interculturalism at UEL in Londrina. maria@culturainglesalondrina.com.br

SUPPLEMENTING TO FOSTER CRITICAL AWARENESS

Undoubtedly, a teacher should always relate to a course book critically, taking into consideration its good and bad points, marrying the textbook's strengths with the teacher's own perception of the class, so that the course book works as a helper rather than a hindrance. Thus, from time to time, supplementing the course book material with activities that promote collaborative work, higher-order thinking and even intercultural awareness, certainly plays an utmost role when it comes to critical thinking skills development.

For instance, this could be done by using a variety of authentic materials, such as film snippets, news items, and songs, among others. Once authentic materials provide genuine cultural information such as practices, beliefs and other non-linguistic aspects, they motivate students to establish a comparison between their own culture and the target culture using English as lingua franca. In this article, I will share a rewarding experience I had based on a lesson about inclusive initiatives. In this lesson, supplementing the course book with authentic material served to considerably enhance learner's critical thinking skills by raising their intercultural awareness.

The Learners

An upper-intermediate group, which according to

the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) belongs B1+ moving to B2 levels, consisting of 6 female students aged between 17 and 18 years old. All of the learners had been studying English as a foreign language for 4 years, having attended courses designed for young adults. These students, who come from upper-middle class, cultivate a positive attitude towards English as an additional language, demonstrating keen interest not only in linguistic features, but also in cultural and intercultural aspects.

The Lesson

As proposed by the course book, the main topic of the lesson was "taste in music", which was contextualised with a short text, clearly developed for didactic purposes, about the Venezuelan inclusive project *El Sistema*. I established as the main aim of the lesson to make students better able to analyse and discuss inclusive social measures based on their intercultural perceptions.

After carrying out a careful analysis of the course book material, as well as considering my students' needs and interests, I noticed that the opening text in the course book provided the students with a limited view of the Venezuelan inclusive project *El Sistema*. Although it was clear that the main aim of this

reading activity was to serve as a springboard for an upcoming listening task, it would be an utter waste to neglect the intercultural importance of the topic. Therefore, I decided to supplement the course book's reading section with a ten-minute extract from a BBC documentary entitled "How music saved Venezuela's children", which was firstly broadcast on 28th November 2008 on BBC One as part of the arts series "Imagine". This documentary depicts the continuing saga of *El Sistema*, a social action that has been running in Venezuela since 1975 and that aims at giving underprivileged youngsters a better life prospect through classical music.

The Supplementing Activity

In order to fulfil my purpose, I designed a video activity focusing on two key principles that are meant to promote critical thinking: reflection and justification. That is to say, as part of the activity, students were encouraged to reflect upon the importance of inclusive social measures, as well as to use logical skills to justify their assumptions and beliefs. In order to do that, they had to activate their own background knowledge of the topic and to establish connections between that and the content they were exposed to. Concerning the video activity per se, it was organised in three parts, as follows:

- a. **Before watching** a snippet of the documentary "How music saved Venezuela's children", *discuss* with a partner:
 - What might be the youngsters' main motivation to take part in The Venezuelan's Youth Orchestra?
 - How important do you think this project is for Venezuela?
- b. **While watching** the snippet of the documentary "How music saved Venezuela's children", *answer* the questions below:
 3. What did the critic say about the orchestra's performance at the Royal Albert Hall?
 4. What percentage of Venezuelans lives in poverty?
 5. What's "El Sistema"?
 6. Who's Gustavo Dudamel?
 7. How did Gustavo Dudamel get involved in music?
 8. How did "El Sistema" help Noelia?
 9. What made Jose Antonio Abreu start "El Sistema"?

10. How does Abreu see the orchestra?
 11. How are children with special needs included in the project?
 12. What are the values Abreu mentions?
- c. **After watching** the snippet of the documentary "How music saved Venezuela's children", *talk* to a partner. *Discuss* the following:
- Reconsider the question "How important do you think this project is for Venezuela?" from part A. Is there anything you would like to add to that?
 - How does this documentary affect you?
 - In your opinion, which elements make "El Sistema" a success?
 - If you were to take part in a social action, what kind of support would you give?

It is crucial to highlight that both parts A and C are the core of the activity since they not only promote collaborative learning among the students, but also trigger in-depth discussions and foster students' intercultural awareness due to the more challenging open-ended questions.



Why supplement the course book with a video activity?

It should be noted that one of the main reasons for this qualitative addition is to promote students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity. According to Pulverness (2004:1), "this sensation of seeing one's own [...] culture refracted through the medium of a foreign language [...]" provokes the feeling of otherness of an alien culture. Pulverness goes on to add that it is "the teacher's responsibility to diversify the range of voices and perception" (2003:3) in the classroom,

which can be done through the use of a variety of authentic materials – in this case, a snippet from a BBC documentary. Furthermore, Sherman (2003:62) highlights that one of the purposes of a documentary is to present facts and opinions about social problems, art, music, culture, among other subjects, providing basis for comparison with one's own country.

Moreover, as suggested by Goldenstein (2014:1), the use of video in language teaching plays the role of a springboard for other tasks such as listening comprehension and further discussions, integrating and developing all four skills. Adding to this, real language exposure provided by authentic materials makes the learning experience far more engaging, after all, "authenticity itself in an inducement – there is the special thrill in being able to understand and enjoy the real thing" (Sherman, 2003:2).

The Learners' Response

Kramsch (2004:178) supports the idea that "it has become commonplace to say that authenticity does not lie in the text (in the case of the present lesson, the aural text from the documentary snippet), but in the uses speakers and readers make of it", once "authenticity has to do with appropriate response".

The way the students reacted to the documentary, as well as their enthusiastic responses during interaction, played a role of utmost importance in this activity. A pivotal moment of the lesson happened when one of the students brought up the *Afro Reggae* project – a Brazilian inclusive initiative, similar to the one in Venezuela. That comes to show that students were able to establish a comparison between two different cultures using English as a lingua franca.

The supplementing material did add to the lesson in terms of promoting both intercultural awareness and critical thinking. It also generated motivation and intrinsic interest among the students, who were absolutely attentive during the entire activity. Last but not least, it neutralized the lack of teaching sequence between the reading and listening sections in the course book and, at the same time, it provided students with variety. Another important point to highlight is that it was an absolute delight for the students to see and listen to the Venezuela's Youth Orchestra actually performing.

Readapting the supplementing material for further use

Since I planned this supplementing video activity targeting a high-profile group, it could present difficulties if I were to use the same activity with a less proficient, or even a less confident group. However, what can easily be done is to grade the task instead of grading the input. That is to say, I could do away with both sections A and C and turn section B into an information gap activity.

In this way, the supplementing video activity would still provide students with a higher-order thinking task, and the information gap activity would cater for all the four skills. Thus, less confident students would not have necessarily to formulate more complex and personal responses based on critical awareness, and that would hopefully lower their affective filter considerably.

Conclusion

The sensible use of supplementing materials provides the learners with the opportunity to access other cultures, raising their critical and intercultural awareness, even when immersed in the artificial and standardised environment of a classroom. The attempt to develop critical thinking and intercultural awareness in the language classroom goes beyond a purely linguistic goal to become a contemporary educational endeavour.

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Anielle SR Barboz

Anielle SR Barboza, Santa Mônica School teacher, NEL/UERJ Teacher, Bachelor's degree and Master degree in Mass Communication at North Carolina State University, Graduate student at UERJ, and Janaina Cardoso's trainee at a special project at UERJ focusing on Learning Strategies.



Janaina Cardoso

Janaina Cardoso, Doctor in Language Studies (UFF), Dip RSA – Cambridge University, President of APLIERJ, university teacher and coordinator of two language projects (LICOM/LETI NEL) at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. E-mail: janascardoso1@gmail.com

Teachers cannot just create and propose a kind of activity for their students, without carefully considering the students' profile: their needs, preferences and level. This is also true for learners who are engaged in the process of learning a second language, especially if they are at the initial levels. The reason for affirming that is because teachers should not only help learners acquire a second language, but also create opportunities for students to learn how to think critically. In other words, our role is to help learners become independent and competent in the four skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking, without neglecting the fifth and most important one: thinking.

Critical thinking may be defined as individuals' ability to think and make correct decisions independently. But it also has to do with understanding that messages have a purpose, not always so clear at first. As for the production of messages, the ideas have to be clear, we have to focus on the audience, and base our points of view on solid facts. Therefore, the enhancement

INCITING LANGUAGE LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING

"A more practiced eye,
A more receptive ear,
A more fluent tongue,
A more involved heart,
A more responsive mind"

Rebecca Oxford

of learners' critical thinking can be considered one of the language teachers' main roles, as critical thinking is responsible for achieving success in the other skills.

Hence, the development of a more critical thinking attitude cannot be seen as an isolated task, but dealt while working with other activities, such as conversation about different topics, reading and learning how to read, word recognition, vocabulary development, teach for understand in context, listening comprehension, cultural awareness, interdisciplinary projects and other task-based activities. If this practice can be achieve through critical thinking, why not take advantage of that and have a successful class?

Language Learning Strategies and Critical Thinking

Learning strategies may be defined as "conscious or unconscious actions taken by learners which aim at the enhancement of comprehension, learning or retention of information," Cardoso (1997:31). When teachers focus on some specific learning strategies, esp. cognitive, metacognitive and social learning strategies, they may be developing learners' critical thinking at the same time. Cognitive strategies are responsible for the receiving and sending of messages, it also includes analyzing and reasoning and creating structure for language comprehension and production. Metacognitive strategies have to do with organizing your own thoughts, arranging and planning and evaluating your own learning. Finally, the social strategies are responsible for a good interaction with peers, asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others (Oxford 1990). Therefore, the development of effective learning strategies may be directly related to the development of more critical thinking.

Collaborative Approach supporting Critical Thinking

As Anuradha A. Gokhale (1995) affirms that the teaching of a second language through collaborative learning can be wisely important for any student to achieve success while studying a new language, especially if teachers include critical thinking strategies to this process.

For us, language teachers, each opportunity that we have to stimulate a collaborative learning atmosphere, and bringing students together, especially to help each other, is extremely important, interesting, and efficient. Besides, as other teachers, language teachers,

Teachers should not only help learners acquire a second language, but also create opportunities for students to learn how to think critically

must consider which learning strategies may affect positively in the language learning process, and may create successful outcomes for learners and teachers. For example, in a mixed level class, the most advanced students may help the others. Therefore, if we provide activities that would incite this collaboration, not only will we create a pleasant social environment, but also an opportunity for learners to share ideas and progress together.

In Brazil, we see many language centers and private schools that are all about teaching languages applying their own methodologies and values. Most of the times, those institutions focus on their own pedagogical ways of teaching, using their own method/approach and strategies. Although the quantity of schools is increasing every day, unfortunately the quality of their methodology is not always guaranteed. Because most of the time those schools only focus on language development and forget that learning a language involves much more than that.

For instance, as a language teacher working in a secondary private school, I prefer to use interdisciplinary projects, comprehension of texts, and visual aids, and exploiting many different contexts, and attempting to integrate the four (or should I say five) skills during the activities. In this way, I try to stimulate learners' curiosity and creativity, by helping the class to flow and developing learners' habit of asking questions and producing their own answers, critically. When students are working together towards a specific goal, they usually do their best to show what they know, collaborating with one another, and then sharing with the whole class.

We all know that being a teacher involves more than just knowing the subject. We must really know our students and understand what works better for them or not. In my case, I realized that when bringing students together and proposing activities which are related to issues appropriate to their age are greatly enough to make students think and produce successfully. Another important aspect is the right

choice of interesting and technological resources that may grab their attention and provoke enthusiasm while learning.

In a nutshell, the topics, the resources, and the activities proposed, if planned and prepared carefully can produce high level of thinking skills, developing learners' creativity and autonomy while acquiring a language.

Critical Thinking and Language Teacher Development

Observing some classes in a language school, one university student (a future language teacher) noticed that some teachers adopt an approach which is neither teacher-centered nor learner-centered, but what he named "e-board centered". This remark was not only based on the fact that learners were all facing the board, or that the activities were catching learners' attention, but rather that some teachers were completely dependent on the e-board to give their classes and relied only on activities that were not prepared by the teachers themselves, but by "outsiders" (he meant the coordinators). The observer added that the best classes he had the chance to observe were the ones in which the teachers were not so dependent on ready-made activities and knew how to use technology as a tool, profiting the most from it. The other observer agreed with him and added that the best classes are the ones in which teachers "used their minds", were thinkers, not simply "copiers/processors". This is a good example of how critical thinking is essential.

Good teachers cultivate critical thinking (intellectually engaged thinking) at every stage of learning (NCECT 2014). In order to cultivate critical thinking, these teachers have to develop their own critical thinking and this should be the main aim of teacher education. However, what we find at universities (at least at most Brazilian ones) are still more lectures than problem solving- activities, more individual studies than collaborative learning. High education classes are too much teacher-centered and not much critical thinking goes on. On one side, learners surfing on the Internet, not researching, but answering their Facebook messages. On the other side, teachers insisting on following a class pattern that does not work anymore, which Freire called 'banking education'.

The teacher cannot be the information provider anymore (this the Internet can do very well), but the one who may help their students learn "how to fish" and how to filter the information they need. What the teacher educator has to show is how to

ask questions, how to create intriguing problems, without necessarily finding answers or solving the problems. Educators have to "focus on the generation of new ideas, how to develop skills such as flexibility, originality and innovation: 'thinking out of the box' or 'lateral thinking'," as Lewis (2007) mentions when partly quoting Edward de Bono.

The teacher educator has to provide practice on how to develop effective reasoning. When dealing with comprehension (listening or reading) make learners aware that every text has a context, that is, it was written with a certain purpose, focusing on a certain audience. There is always a message, which most of the time goes beyond the "surface". When learners express themselves using a (spoken or written) text, they cannot forget to make very clear their point of view, to consider the audience, to settle questions in order to solve problems, to base their arguments (thesis) on facts (data, information and evidence). "All reasoning contains inference or interpretation by which we draw conclusions and give meaning to data (NCECT 2014)". The writer/speaker has to be aware of the implications and consequences of what they write or speak.

"Teaching requires critical reflection about practice."
(Paulo Freire)

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Ana Flora Alves

Ana Flora Alves de Oliveira, PUC-Rio Letras undergraduate student. A 'junior' member of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group, she finds Exploratory Practice especially worthwhile to engage in pre-professional reflection. anaflores.alves17@gmail.com



Thelma Christina R. Côrtes

Thelma Christina Ribeiro Côrtes, PUC-Rio Letras undergraduate student. A 'junior' member of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group with special motivation in sustainability. thelmachris@hotmail.com



Walewska Gomes Braga

Walewska Gomes Braga, Teacher of English at Escola Municipal Santo Tomás de Aquino, Rio de Janeiro. A member of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group, she works with students to understand life in the classroom. Interested in Exploratory Practice principles and in sustainability. walewskabraga@globo.com

WHY DON'T WE LIKE THE BOOKS WE NEED TO USE?

The second semester of 2013 started after a mix of vacations and a long teacher strike. We, the four teacher learners and our teacher, Walewska, went back to Escola Municipal Santo Tomás de Aquino, the school in which we have all been participating as grantees of the English subproject of the Teaching Initiation

Scholarship Program (PIBID/PUC-Rio, Capes 2012)¹.

¹ The "Institutional Scholarship for Teaching Initiation Program" (PIBID) is an initiative that aims at improving and valuing the education of future teachers, who act under the guidance of a university professor and a school teacher. For more, access http://200.19.73.116/pibidingles.ct.utfpr.edu.br/?page_id=7

The books and our emerging puzzles

As soon as we met, Walewska told us that from that moment on we would not use *Links*², the official PNLD³ book, anymore. Now we would have to use a book called *INTERACTION ED*⁴, developed by Rio de Janeiro's municipality in partnership with a private editor. We asked her about the reasons for this change and she told us that the only answer she could think of was that we should, in fact, have used *INTERACTION ED* since the beginning of 2013. However, as the school had not received the book, but had received *Links*, we started to work with it, because it was the only material we had available. We had already worked with *INTERACTION ED* in 2012 and we did not like this book very much; we worked with *Links* in the beginning of 2013 and we did not like it either. Taking this into account, we started to ask ourselves "Why don't we like these books?". As Exploratory Practice⁵ (EP) practitioners we refrained ourselves from rushing to answer our puzzle, or as we say in EP, the issue we were trying to understand. We decided to engage in what we call 'work for understanding'⁶.

As we thought even more about the material we were using in the classroom, we perceived that our students never brought the English book to class or, even if they did, they would always say that they had not. Monitoring what was going on, we noticed that sometimes parts of the books were extremely difficult and sometimes they were too easy. Besides, the books just depict foreign students, whose realities, lives, histories and cultures do not come anywhere near those of our students.



Work for understanding

As part of our work for understanding, it was time to share our puzzlement with our students. So, we asked the 6th and 8th grade morning classes the following question: "Do our students like or do not like the book? Explain why!" The learners answered in a cohesive, coherent, consistent and mature way, showing that they knew exactly what they were talking about. At first, we asked them to write on a sheet of paper what they liked and what they didn't like about the book and explain why. Then, they created two different posters titled "I like" and "I don't like". Since this activity was integrated with the grammar

- 2 LINKS: English for teens, Denise Santos e Amadeus Marques. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 2011.
- 3 PNLD stands for "Programa Nacional do Livro Didático" (in a free translation, "National Textbook Program").
- 4 InterAction ED. Rio de Janeiro: Learning Factory Ltda, 2012.
- 5 For more on EP, access the website <http://www.letras.puc-rio.br/unidades&nucleos/epcentre/index.htm>
- 6 For more, see Allwright, D. and Hanks, J. 2009. The developing language learner: An introduction to exploratory practice. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Students suggested
that the books had
a blank space in
which they could do
whatever they wanted
- drawing, writing or
composing songs

content that they were supposed to learn at the time (I like..., I don't like...), we considered it a potentially exploitable pedagogic activity⁷.

Reflecting about positive aspects of the textbook, they said: "I like the drawings because they are colorful"; "I like the CD because it is different and the class becomes more fun"; and "I like the glossary because it always helps me to find the meaning of the words I don't know". Some of the negative aspects pointed out were: "I don't like the book because its material gets dirty, crumples and rips easily"; "I don't like the exercises because they are all the same"; and "I don't like the characters in the book because they are really childish". Some answers seemed to be contradictory, but it was perfectly possible to understand the students' points of view. The apparent contradictions made sense if we take into account that there are students who like English more than others and that some of them understand the content more easily.

We also realized that the students complained a lot about the stories in the English books. These, they thought, were always about foreign students visiting London or New York, for example. Students claimed that this is too distant from their realities. They proposed a story about foreign students coming to Brazil to visit the favelas⁸ in which they live. This way,

⁷ Activities that integrate teachers, learners and regular pedagogic tasks to work for understandings.

⁸ Favelas are urban slums. <http://www.linguee.com.br/portuguese-ingles/>

the book would come closer to the reality of many Brazilian students, making their learning much more effective and enjoyable.

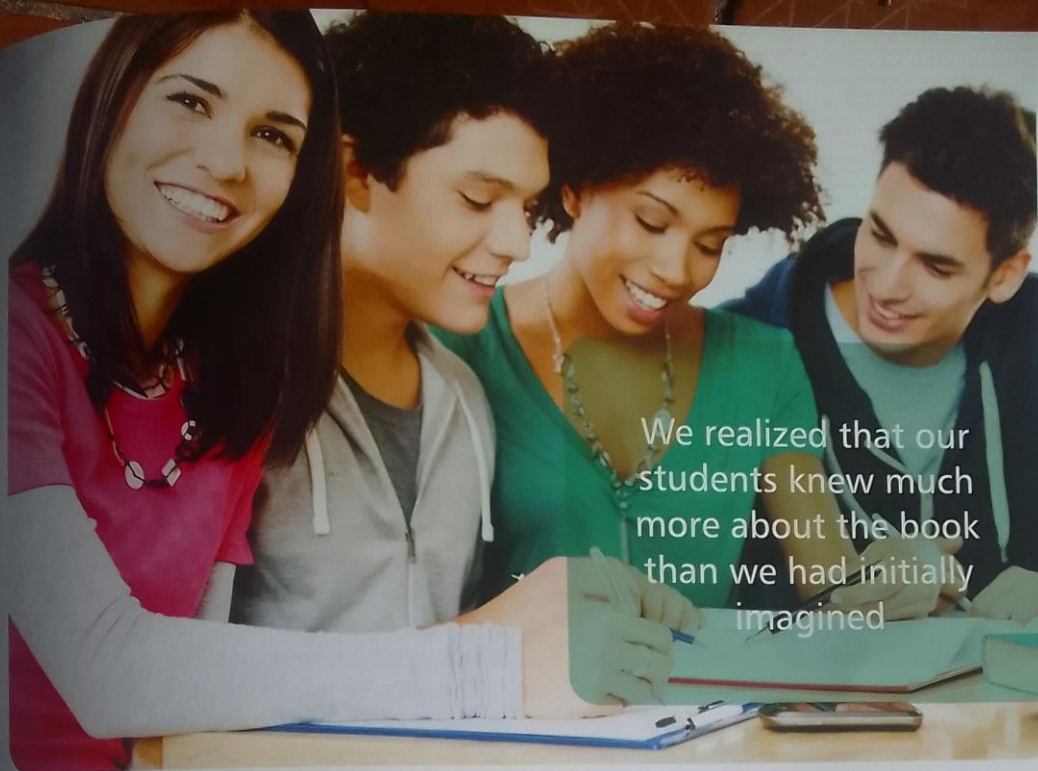
Students' suggestions: their own books

The students' answers inspired us to encourage the creation of posters to express and reflect their own suggestions to improve the English book. The most common one was the combination of the book with multimedia platforms – such as mobile applications and websites; only one student suggested substituting the book for tablets. What really called our attention was the fact that almost all the students exposed in a clear way their desire to be authors of their book. They suggested that the books had a blank space in which they could do whatever they wanted – drawing, writing or composing songs, for example –, which would make them feel that they had also created the book or a part of it. Time for fun is needed, pleasure is desirable.

Working with the 6th year afternoon class, Walewska, along with the students, proposed the creation of a book as classwork. The students appreciated the idea, which resulted in a book named "The Mystery of the Universe" by the students. In it, the students showed that they had diversified knowledge and interests ranging from colors to the geology of the planets. They also included a story that was about a group of 6 students who went on a space trip to collect and study some rocks and stars. The English language was used communicatively and as part of the adventure they included as content colors, food, clothes and numbers. They also created a game section that had crosswords and word searches since they are really fond of this type of activities in English.

Some of our understandings

All this involvement, creativity and motivation led Walewska to suggest that some students of the 6th and 8th morning classes interviewed other teachers and friends from other classes about the course pack imposed by the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, in order to find out what they thought about the



We realized that our students knew much more about the book than we had initially imagined

material they have to use and, most importantly, how they felt about the loss of their autonomy as teachers. By analyzing the other teachers' opinions, we realized that they are not satisfied with the course pack, and that there is a need to search on the Internet for materials to complement what the course pack does not cover. At that moment we understood that no book is complete, any book may be improved by the teachers and the students in creative and productive ways, in other words, a challenge to be faced for those who believe in going beyond.

Indeed critical thinking was what emerged from the work we did with our students and we were very pleased. They told us that they did not like the course packs used in other classes, because they found them "boring". They enjoyed finding out that their teachers didn't like the material either. The students felt closer to the teachers and recognized that because teachers did not like the course packs, they prepared extra activities to supplement them. It was unexpected but extremely gratifying to see that students studying at *Fundamental* considered the extra material a very important part of the learning process. They also understood that, in doing so,

their teachers cared for them and worried about their process of learning.

At the end of the process of understanding of our initial puzzle, we realized that our students knew much more about the book than we had initially imagined. They had seriously engaged in the creation of the posters and when we reflected about our puzzle, they had helped us understand by working together with us. It dawned on us that we can create, recreate, complement and update any book we have to use in the classroom. We can and should become authors of our own material.

As a group, we realized that the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP), which always underlie the work we develop in PIBID, i.e., EP increases self-esteem and stimulates autonomy in students and teachers alike. By engaging in EP in our classroom, we created opportunities for critical thinking and mutual learning. Most importantly, we can contribute to the development of students who are no doubt able to think and reflect, thus acting as opinion makers in their schools and in society at large.



Andrea Gutierrez

Andrea Gutierrez studies English with a focus on Creative Writing at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, US. She will be graduating in 2015, and plans to apply to MFA programs. She very much hopes to continue working in ELT in the future.

CREATIVE CULTURE CRITICS IN THE ELT CLASSROOM.

The Culture Kaleidoscope.

My introduction to the ELT classroom arrived serendipitously during my summer break from university in the United States. I had applied for an internship opportunity in La Plata, Argentina, and was selected to participate as a teacher and researcher at Home Intercultural Learning (www.homeintercultural.com.ar). The fact that I was a foreigner both to the country and to ELT intimidated me, but it also gave me a clear-cut perspective. I was fortunate enough to be able to empathize with both sides of the paradigm: the language learner and the language teacher. As I struggled daily with my limited Spanish speaking skills, my inability to navigate the city's diagonals, and my poor mate (the Argentina beverage) etiquette, I felt an increasing solidarity with my students. I mention this because one of the most vital things that I learned throughout this experience is how crucial culture is to learning a language. Perhaps it is inevitable then, that my lessons subsequently took hard cultural angles. This was influenced both by my experience and interest, and guided by my predecessors. Ignited by John Corbett's book, *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching*, recommended to me by the Director of Home Intercultural Learning, Andrea

Assenti del Rio, my students and I began to take cultural norms to task. The result was open-minded and inquisitive reflection. If I had to describe what we did together in two words they would be: critical thinking.

In regard to the four skills of language learning (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), we were able to get two of them accomplished quite easily. In our conversation heavy classes, students were listening intently and speaking insistently. They refused to allow a native English speaker to use Spanish in their classroom. It truly was their ambition and insistence that made it so. Well that, and, did I mention that my Spanish skills are limited? As a writer, I felt it was my personal duty to produce results on the latter two skills. I had my work cut out for me, as three of my four classes were teenagers. However, my research provided me with the perfect format: technology.

Technology working to my benefit is somewhat ironic. I, unlike many Americans, do not have a Facebook, an Instagram, or an iPhone. I am not what you would call "technologically inclined". I am inclined, however, to investigate the ways in which technology is changing education. Granted, this is the albatross of teachers the world over, and I am no hero, but I have a knack

for biting off more than I can chew. What I found interesting about this endeavor in the ELT realm is that technology is a direct contradiction to the long held belief that immersion is the most effective way to learn a language. This belief implies that there is no substitution for face-to-face conversation. I couldn't agree more. I would like to believe that this is the case for people who speak the same language, but alas, I am a dying breed. Despite my aversion to technology, I managed to make it work to my benefit, and well, what is more resourceful for global cultural perspective this day in age than the World Wide Web?

I talked to my teenagers about being teenagers. We all know that this is no simple topic. We went on about love, dating, prom, bullying, driver's licenses, academic stress, drinking, the transition to adulthood... the list goes on. I shared a few websites with them for comparative purposes. We listened to a podcast on This American Life a National Public Radio broadcast in the United States. The topic was middle school, something that doesn't exist in Argentina, and yet the students here could relate to the North American children they were listening to on the radio. This was enough to break some ground and get their creative juices flowing. We then created Tumblr accounts in class. Wikipedia says of Tumblr: "...a micro blogging platform...the service allows users to post multimedia and other content to a short form blog." We did exactly that. We started to blog about our classroom discussion. The students analyzed the content of the classroom and applied their language skills to the task. The results blew me away. They were analytical, open-minded, diplomatic, and reflective. When I read one particular submission to my colleagues, one of them said, "A teenager wrote that? That's impressive!" I felt like I had won the lottery.

I think the magical component was emotional motivation. When you get people talking, thinking, and writing about something that they care about or relate to, they can't help but think critically. This brings me to another controversial "c" word that makes academics uneasy: creativity. Creativity is inherently reflective, yet it is often written off as impractical in the academic world, because what kind of job are you going to get with an "Art Degree"? Personally, practicality did nothing for my own academic success, being creative was the only thing I was ever good at, and it was the only attribute I thought I had, but it was

enough to get me to apply and get accepted to one of the best private Liberal Arts schools in the United States. Here I was again, 5,414 miles away from the aforementioned private Liberal Arts school, and I was seeing the same positive results happen right before my eyes with my Argentinean students. You capture people when you allow them to get personal, and then they capture you. It's human connectivity.

What happened with my students in Argentina was the result of two month's work, and if you couldn't already tell, I am pretty proud of them. They were immersed in the four skills all at once, and they hardly even noticed. They even went a step beyond and added the infamous C's: culture and creativity. So, I have no hesitation in going a step further and bestowing upon them a triple "C" moniker: Creative Culture Critics. While this is a small-scale victory very personal to my students, and me I don't think that it has to be. Using the Internet as a forum for marginalized voices to be heard is what started the Egyptian Revolution, perpetuated the Occupy Wall Street movement, and gave Justin Bieber his career! For better or worse, the Internet is a powerful platform. If it could be used to diversify the dominant English speaking text, especially in a foreign language-learning context, I think we should go for it!

Students are learning English predominantly because it has become the global "lingua franca", and to prevent the linguistic imperialism, as Corbett calls it, that can accompany a lingua franca, we need fresh and diversified voices to add to the discourse. I think it is a small, but necessary step to take in making globalization a more equal endeavor. Additionally, if we are all continuously analyzing and critiquing our own cultures, we can't help but come out of the process more diplomatic. It is my belief that creative reflection in the ELT classroom can be the groundwork to building up stronger voices that achieve much greater things. It is the critical thinkers of the world, after all, who often arrive first at the solutions.

References

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